

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY  
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

LOSING THE WAR BY WINNING THE BATTLE: JOHN WARDEN'S THEORY OF  
STRATEGIC BOMBING APPLIED TO LIMITED CONFLICT

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Air power is both a promise and a problem. The promise is that strategic bombing may shorten wars by striking at the heart of the enemy and sapping either his will or his ability to continue hostilities. In theory, aircraft have a more direct approach to an opponent's center of gravity and are less susceptible, once air superiority has been attained, to defensive counter measures. The result should be a faster, and therefore more humane, end to the conflict. But the problem with bombing, aside from still unanswered questions about its actual effectiveness, is that in both planning and execution, it tends to blur or erase the distinction between combatants and civilians. At the very least, collateral damage claims unintended victims, especially in urban areas. While precision weapons may reduce the likelihood of noncombatant deaths, air power doctrine itself, which since the First World War has legitimated attacking enemy population centers, makes them all but certain. This unpleasant fact leaves strategists with a dilemma. The potentially most effective use of air power also may be the most morally questionable. In wars for national existence, such as the Second World War, the suffering of innocents may be proportionate to necessary military objectives. But in the limited conflicts that have been fought since the end of the cold war, civilian deaths, especially if they outnumber combatants', may undermine the political influence sought. In the late twentieth century, the problem with strategic bombing may eclipse its promise.

Contemporary air power theorist John Warden inherited Giulio Douhet's enthusiasm for strategic bombing. Like Douhet, Warden recognizes that offensive war from the air brings greater concentration of force against an opponent's vital center more rapidly and with fewer casualties than ground combat. Unlike Douhet, however, Warden's

assessment of the most effective target is not necessarily population centers. Instead, he recognizes five separate centers of gravity related concentrically that might be vulnerable from the sky. Expanding from the middle, the five centers are the enemy command, essential production, transportation, population, and fielded forces. According to Warden, the most effective attack is against the innermost center of gravity, the command; the least effective is against the outermost, the fielded forces. Targeting priority follows logically. First attack the leadership. If that is not possible, hit production centers, and so on. If any of the first three centers is vulnerable, the civilian population may emerge relatively unscathed; and unless none of the other four centers of gravity is exposed, the fielded forces may not be attacked at all.

Warden's theory, accepted as doctrine, would seem to offer at least a partial solution to the problem of civilian deaths in limited wars. Because it allows for the possibility of success using surgical strikes against the smallest and most clearly culpable targets first, material damage and loss of life become inversely related to strategic importance, at least initially. If the enemy command can be eliminated, additional damage and casualties may be unnecessary. Even if some civilians are incidentally killed attacking the command, the loss likely will be proportional to the goal achieved and almost certainly will be far less than would result from either a sustained ground campaign or a wider air operation. In other words, execution is preferable to slaughter.

There are, however, serious weaknesses with Warden's theory. In the first place, it may simply be irrelevant to the types of conflict the United States is likely to encounter

most frequently in the future. Warden assumes universal validity to the priority he gives the five centers of gravity in relation to their importance in sustaining hostilities. While it may be safe to assume that the will of the leadership is a common denominator in all organized aggression, it is not clear that all forms of strife the United States may be called upon to confront militarily will be highly organized or that they will be directed from a common source. The kind of ethnic rage that ripped apart Rwanda or gang violence on a national scale of the sort that savaged Sierra Leone is either spontaneous or only loosely planned. There is no main artery to sever that would prevent the continuation of hostilities. In addition to an absence of a unified command capable of either directing or stopping the violence, there is no production base or transportation network worth mentioning. There is only population. It is safe to assume that Warden would not advocate the bombing of civilians for its own sake. Under his scheme, then strategic bombing is simply irrelevant and would not be a factor in the resolution of the conflict. He may be right as a practical matter of fact, but doctrine should not rule out situational review. Failing to identify a target as one of five pre-ordained centers of gravity does not necessarily rule out the possibility that the target exists, especially as an indirect strategy. There is little comfort in the observation that the United States avoided some of those conflicts this time. The widespread and unfavorable comparisons between assistance given to Albanians and that given to Africans are likely to push for greater American involvement in the future. Indeed, the Clinton doctrine of searching out *genocidaires* virtually guarantees it. Warden simply does not account for the possible use of bombing in this type of scenario.

A corollary and more serious problem to Warden's assumption that the five centers of gravity are universally relevant to conflicts where bombing may be useful is his refusal to distinguish a moral hierarchy among the targets. His solution to the use of air power is ruthlessly technical. Each center is evaluated merely on the basis of the theoretical pressure it exerts on the leadership. His strategy makes no moral distinction between bombing a garrison or attacking a neighborhood. In fact, it is preferable in terms of effectiveness to attack homes, schools, and churches before troops. A charitable view of Warden's mechanistic approach is to say that it is morally neutral, or at least to posit that the damage done and lives lost are proportional to the ends achieved. But under Warden's concept, proportionality is a function of the willingness of the enemy leadership to sacrifice a particular center of gravity in relation to the amount of time the other power is willing to spend prosecuting the war. Warden is happy to oblige if a warlord like Saddam Hussein is willing to bleed his people. The limiting factor is efficiency, not calculations of right and wrong. After the command, production and transportation options are exhausted, the population will be bombed until the attacker comprehends that it is a waste of effort and turns to the fielded forces. This degree of moral indifference may withstand the scrutiny of a Second World War, but it is unlikely to survive for long in more limited arenas.

Unfortunately, Warden's theory does not reach even the mark of moral neutrality. It is fundamentally immoral. Under any circumstances, the last center of gravity Warden targets is the fielded forces. But aside from the leadership, the fielded forces are the only center that has an unambiguously military function. In other words, Warden is not

simply erasing the distinction between combatants and civilians in order to achieve efficient victory. He is, in fact, assigning in every case a higher value to the lives of soldiers than of civilians, without distinction. Finessing the enormity of this departure from traditional western thought is difficult. It is one thing to say that it is desirable to bomb population centers during war in order to force an early decision. Warden goes a step further. His targeting priorities, regardless of any other military activity, makes it preferable to bomb civilians rather than troops in order to force capitulation. Furthermore, he offers no qualifying conditions to his dictum. It appears that as long as strategic bombing is an option, whether in a major war for survival or a minor scrap for political influence, targeting civilians is a better strategy than targeting combatants.

Some may consider it quaint to raise the question of morality in the conduct of modern war. After all, morality has always been elastic depending on the weapons available. Douhet saw no ethical distinction between explosives and gas, and Dwight Eisenhower at one point considered nuclear weapons as just another form of bullet. Even non-military measures like economic sanctions disproportionately affect the least consequential members of any society. Why should Warden's refusal to become squeamish at the thought of creating civilian casualties before military raise serious concern?

The answer to that question is found by applying Warden's theory to Operation Allied Force. Strategic bombing clearly was an option. All five centers of gravity were accessible in Serbia to allied targeting. There was a discreet, identifiable leadership and command structure as well as production centers, transportation networks, urban

population, and fielded forces in Kosovo. Objective conditions in the theater were optimal for planning and executing air operations from the inner to the outer Serbian centers of gravity. Warden's strategy would launch offensive air attacks directly into Belgrade, first against the regime and infrastructure and then, if necessary, against the population. With luck, it may never have been necessary to venture beyond the capital region toward the Serbian military units in Kosovo that were committing the atrocities that drew the United States and its allies into war in the first place. In this ethically upside-down universe, psychological dislocation may become a bigger problem for the aircrews than for their victims.

It takes little imagination to see how that strategy could have been catastrophic to allied war aims. As probable civilian casualties were counted against negligible military losses, either allied or Serbian, the international community would have caught its collective, horrified breath. Indeed, later in the war when successive allied mistakes actually killed a number of civilians, including Chinese "journalists" at their embassy, a temporary halt was called to the bombing. Had those errors occurred at the outset, and absent the qualifying context of a record of gradual escalation against the Serb military in Kosovo, the shaky international support that held the allied coalition together may have evaporated. The Russians and the Chinese already were working toward that end. In retrospect, European insistence on a go-slow policy toward bombing, despite the angst it caused American planners, may have saved the day. If nothing else, it demonstrated the importance of being earnest. Early restraint underscored the credibility of the allies' claim to limited objectives and bought enough tolerance, including from a skeptical

American public, to rationalize the unintended deaths and to continue prosecuting the war.

The issue of morality, then, is not simply a matter of ethics. It is a matter of legitimacy. As Clausewitz and his intellectual heirs intone, all wars are about policy. Even morally repugnant leaders like Hitler, Hussein, and Milosevic use their militaries to achieve broader political objectives than managed violence. As the world's preeminent status quo power, America's wars, as Warden himself observes, are optional. They are about stability and influence, not revolutionary or territorial change. The United States uses its military in conflict to preserve the post-world war two institutions, treaties, conventions and agreements that shape and give confidence to the international order. America chooses its means with an eye toward restoring the peace rather than simply winning the war. It was toward this end, for example, that the United States initiated Desert Shield long before it launched Desert Storm and then refrained from annihilating Iraqi forces near the end of the war. Simply put, the United States generally does not need to be concerned about its survival. It does need to be concerned, however, about the internationally recognized legitimacy of its leadership.

Warden's theory of air power may have ended the war against the Serbs quickly, either in military victory or in dissolution of the allied coalition. Either way, the price paid would have been at high cost to American leadership. The decline in self-confidence and influence the United States experienced following Vietnam was a lesson in the perils of misunderstanding the character of a particular conflict. The result was a

loss of political legitimacy both at home and abroad. Raising the moral stakes in Kosovo by leading with targets that intentionally put civilians at higher risk than soldiers would have signaled a misinterpretation of that conflict also as a “must win” rather than an optional war. In fact, after bombs mistakenly hit a refugee column and other civilians, Senator John McCain and others whose initial support for American involvement was either tepid or non-existent, declared that the only acceptable outcome now was for the United States to win. Apparently, the stakes had been raised to a height that precluded negotiated settlement. If that sentiment had prevailed in the face of greater Serbian resilience, a relatively minor intervention over human rights would have been transformed into a regime-changing conflict between states. Whether or not the result was a Vietnam-like quagmire, political legitimacy surely would have been lost. America and its allies merely wanted to restore the status quo in Kosovo. Using a strategy that bent or ignored the traditional moral constraints that define the status quo would have called into question the credibility of that limited objective.

The principal argument against Warden’s theory of strategic bombing, then, is that it is not very useful. Just war theorists may pick apart its ethical failings on any number of grounds, but it is statesmen, not theologians, who will find it least acceptable in the current national security context. America’s success in upholding the status quo depends, in part, on the restraint it exercises in its military operations. Limited wars may be fought with overwhelming force, but they cannot be prosecuted with moral indifference, or worse, with immoral doctrine. International consensus about the balance between ends

and means helps determine the legitimacy of the objective. By ignoring that requirement, Warden's strategy would defeat both the enemy and the allies.

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